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VAN PEEBLES STILL BREAKING NEW GROUND

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American Accent

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"Griot" and "Renaissance man" are the terms widely used when describing veteran filmmaker/spoken-word artist/novelist Melvin Van Peebles. Those descriptions and more seem apt this summer, as the Manhattan-based Van Peebles flies to Paris July 15 to serve as "honorary president" for the opening of the countrywide "Racines Noires 98," aka Black Roots, the cultural festival organized to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in France.

He'll be back in the States for appearances Aug. 19 and 26 at Fez in lower Manhattan to present his music-cum-spoken word cabaret show, "Melvin Van Peebles' Roadkill Wid' Brer Soul." And in between, Van Peebles will continue pre-production work in France for the filming next spring of a movie, based on his 1967 French novel "The Chinaman Of The 14th District," that he wrote and will direct.

And everywhere he goes, people seem to revere him for "just doing what I like," in the man's own words, "and following my instincts."

"He is the godfather of [African-American] cinema because his film started the blaxploitation wave," says fellow filmmaker Saint Clair Bourn, a 30-year film veteran who shot the documentary "The Making Of 'Do The Right Thing.'"

"He made a film in Hollywood that a lot of black people came to see, and Hollywood saw that there was an audience that they didn't know about and used his model," Bourn says. "They took out the politics, took out the music, and made a bunch of films based on what he started."

The movie of which Bourn speaks is, of course, the groundbreaking 1971 film "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song," which Van Peebles produced and distributed independently. The movie was about the life-and-death chase of an innocent African-American man caught in a police scheme

gone awry.

"He is the reason why I do what I do," says Warrenton Hudlin, half of movie team the Hudlin brothers, producers of "Boomerang."

"['Sweetback'] was the first time an [African-American] man killed cops in a movie and survived, Jack! I saw that [movie] and said, 'I can do that.' He was the first person to let me know that [an African-American making a movie] could be done."

"The most outstanding thing about Melvin for me is that he understood the problems of the [African-American filmmaker] in relation to the larger industry, early on," says fellow filmmaker William Greaves. "He undertook to distribute his own film in the face of resistance by conventional distribution methods and went on to have success."

" 'Sweetback' is very instructive to a lot of [African-American] filmmakers trying to work on Hollywood's plantation," Greaves adds. "Melvin represented more than a maverick; he was rebel against the whole Hollywood establishment."

Van Peebles, who was born and raised in Chicago, first came to notoriety when he was chosen as the French delegate to the San Francisco Film Festival in the late 1960s. His film "Le Permission (Story Of A 3 Day Pass)," a love story about an African-American soldier and a French girl, was widely hailed at the festival.

"It really blew people away because it was a French film made by an [African-American] when there were no [African-American] directors in Hollywood," says Bourn.

Van Peebles went on to make "Sweetback" in the U.S., which broke barriers not only in film but also in the creation of a movie soundtrack. "He is the first person who put thought into the music that accompanied a movie," says William "Spaceman" Patterson, co-producer of Van Peebles' "Ghetto Gothic" album recorded in 1994 for Capitol Records. "Before him it was just 'la, la, la.' He made the movie soundtrack become a vehicle of expression in itself."

Patterson also credits Van Peebles with opening the door for Earth, Wind & Fire, who was a virtual unknown when it recorded the music for "Sweetback."

"He opened the doors for the influence of what they did musically with R&B, fusing it with jazz and funk," says Patterson.

Van Peebles maintained his open-door policy toward musical influences when he contributed his spoken-word tour de force "Cruel Jim Crow (Posse Don't Play That)" track to the 1993 A&M soundtrack to "Posse," a film starring and directed by his son Mario. The soundtrack also featured the music of Tone L-oc, Big Daddy Kane, the Neville Brothers, Intelligent Hoodlum, and Sounds Of Blackness. Truth is, Melvin Van Peebles knows how to blend in and stand out while contributing something unique and essential.

"The thing about Melvin is that he never loses his vision," says Bob Cutarella, a producer/independent publisher and administrator of Van Peebles' publishing company, Oh Yeah

Inc., about Van Peebles' own music, both spoken word and instrumental. "His music paints these pictures that are, to me, a realistic portrayal of life as he sees it."

Cutarella first met Van Peebles when he was East Coast director at MCA in the early 1990s.

"He explores other ways of instrumentation, even writing free-form music. He uses suites of music, solos with the violin or the cello, whereas most guys would have opted for a synthesizer."

Cutarella also pegs Van Peebles as a progenitor of rap and spoken word.

"We had this rap convention one day, right around the time when rap music started selling 5 [million] and 6 million copies. There are all these rappers there, and in walks Melvin. He got up to speak, and all of the sudden it was like this incredible education going on. People didn't really realize how far back [rap goes]. We started getting a lot of sample requests for his music after that."

The groundbreaking album by Van Peebles that helped plant the roots of modern rap was "Brer Soul," released by A&M Records Sept. 26, 1968 (Music to My Ears, Billboard, July 11, 1992). A 10-track storytelling record of rhythmic monologues detailing the urban African-American experience, it was a listening experience in every musical and dramatic sense.

Patterson agrees. "People call what he does [with music] rap. But he did it more over jazz-based soul music and even more with gospel influences. He's like a throwback to the way the beatniks recited poetry over the conga drum. Except that he advanced the way he spoke the words.

"It wasn't just rhyming words," adds Patterson. "He had very important stories to tell, and he did it in such a profound way, he is like a thinker of lyrics. And the way he does it allows you to hear and feel every word."

But with all the accolades bestowed upon him by his peers and proteges, Van Peebles can be very nonchalant about his achievements.

"When I started [making music], there was not a lot of black music talking about certain subjects that I wanted to talk about," he says. "At least, not to the degree at which I wanted to see them broached. So I found it necessary to invent a style where those things could be talked about. I decided to sublimate the orchestration, to minimize it so people would be forced to concentrate on the words. And the chanting became what people now call spoken word. That's how the whole thing evolved. It really wasn't more complicated than that."

His start in films occurred in pretty much the same fashion.

"I had written a story about driving a cable car, and one day someone got on and said, 'Gee, that was a nice story. It was almost like a movie.' And I decided to make my own movie."

He filmed three movie shorts, "Sunlight," "A King," and "A Pick Up For Herrick." He also recorded the music for the soundtracks himself.

"I am always realistic," he says about his subject matter. "I just pick the subject matter from what I

see on the street. It's not arty; I just see people as they work, where they stay. I call it like it is."

His most current thesis is an acclaimed new documentary (premiered at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival and the first New York "docfest" international documentary festival) about the history of African-Americans in film, titled "Melvin Van Peebles' Classified X."

Van Peebles uses old clips to chronicle, to powerful critical effect, the images of African-Americans as historically portrayed in Hollywood, from white actors' portrayal of African-American characters in blackface to the current sidekick bit parts African-American actors play. The documentary was showcased to rave reviews at a weeklong African-American film festival last month at the Walter Reade Theater in New York.

"Melvin Van Peebles' Classified X" will be released on Fox Lorber home video this autumn and will be featured on BET Movies/Starz! channel in November, when the station will highlight Van Peebles' contributions to filmmaking. "Sweetback" and "The Story of A 3 Day Pass" will also be shown throughout the month.

On the musical front, Van Peebles returned to the stage this summer with the cabaret show that included the hand-picked musical trio Roadkill. They recently completed a three-month run at the Oak Cabaret Supper Club in Greenwich Village, and Van Peebles says their upcoming appearances at Fez will be "an extended edition of this work in progress."

At the Oak, Van Peebles performed some of his older material, including "Lilly Done The Zampoughi Every time I Pulled Her Coattail" from his debut album, "Blinded By Your Stuff" from the "Ghetto Gothic" album, "Feast On Me" from the 1971 Broadway musical (and subsequent movie) "Don't Play Us Cheap," and "Come To Mama" from his 1984 off-Broadway production of "The Champeen"). Plus, there was new material and a few deconstructed lyrics from songs he didn't write but mischievously appropriated, like Billy Ray Cyrus' "Achy Breaky Heart" and Sheryl Crow's "All I Wanna Do."

"Everybody thought I should use Motown songs," says Van Peebles, "but I've never gone for the obvious, because people like to compartmentalize things. Instead, I'm looking for the joinings and linkages we don't allow ourselves to see."

Meanwhile, Van Peebles is under discussions regarding the possible reissue of "Brer Soul" and his other landmark A&M albums, "Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death" and "As Serious As A Heart Attack," as well as the "Ghetto Gothic" set. Moreover, he recently completed a complete technical restoration ("They look gorgeous now," he enthuses, "better than their original theatrical release") of "Sweetback," "3 Day Pass," and "Don't Play Us Cheap" films, which are distributed by Xenon Entertainment Group, one of the foremost suppliers of low-budget independent films made by and for African-Americans.

Van Peebles is also a key shareholder in Xenon. "As you go along, films all get placed somewhere, or at some event," he says. "And when I make a deal, I usually try to own part of the stock, so that I'm not simply putting something into it. I try to have a significant portion of the deal be a sweetener for me. Xenon specializes in films by and about African-Americans, and since my work is a cornerstone of their catalog, I might as well share in the company's profits."

Having also written a successful book about investing and options trading on Wall Street ("Bold Money" [Warner Books]), Van Peebles has been willing to take any and all risks in order to realize his career dreams.

"All my stuff, especially the musical stuff, has always been like the period when Dylan or Miles Davis went electric," says Van Peebles as he strolls through Greenwich Village on a recent evening, as a dozen passers-by of every age and background called out to him, stopping to shake his hand and ask for autographs. "Everybody always screams that it's too new, or too different, or too strange, but time has shown that it's usually right on time and also around for the long haul."

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Van Peebles

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Roadkill

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Black Dreams, White Schemes

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Brer Soul

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BY SHAWNEE SMITH

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